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ICRC suspension of prison visits in East Timor jeopardises prisoners' welfare

The protection of many hundreds, if not thousands, of political prisoners in the occupied territory of East Timor has been gravely jeopardised by the decision yesterday of the International Committee of the Red Cross to suspend all prison visits in the territory. Because of the widely dispersed network of detention places, which exist at military commands in the most remote areas, the precise number of detainees is not known.

In an unusually blunt and angry statement, the ICRC's chief delegate in Indonesia, M. Pierre Pont said the agency had been forced to take a "very difficult, complex, serious and heavy decision" because "the necessary conditions for Red Cross visits had not been met".

TAPOL believes that the difficulties encountered by the ICRC can only be reversed by means of intense pressure from governments around the world which maintain close relations with the military regime in Jakarta. It has called on the British Government and the European Community in particular to condemn in the strongest terms the army's sabotage of ICRC activities in East Timor and insist that the humanitarian agency been enabled to carry out its mandate without interruption.

The suspension of ICRC visits comes as international pressure has been mounting for the Red Cross to have immediate and uninterrupted access to the imprisoned resistance leader, Xanana Gusmao, who started a hunger strike some ten days ago, and to protest at the unlawful removal of thirteen East Timorese prisoners serving heavy sentences to jails in Kupang, Mataram (on Lombok island) and Jakarta. Xanana Gusmao has been held incommunicado since being sentenced to life on 21 May. Despite repeated requests, his father and sisters have been refused permission to visit him.

The latest victim of the army's reign of terror is **Rui Antonio da Cruz**, an East Timorese student in Bali, who was arrested on arrival at Dili airport and severely tortured ten days ago. He was forced to divulge the names of eight East Timorese students in Bali whose freedom and physical well-being are now in grave danger.

The military authorities in East Timor have made no secret of their determination to put a stop to ICRC activities. Earlier this month, military commander Major-General Theo Syafei, chief in Bali of the military command in control of East Timor, said the ICRC would have to shut down its office in East Timor.

Taking his protest against this threat to the highest level, ICRC president, Cornelio Sommaruga, on a visit to Jakarta, was given assurances by President Suharto that the office would not be forced to close. He was also assured by Foreign Minister Ali Alatas that "(ICRC) visits can be undertaken in as regular a fashion as possibility and the continuity ... also maintained".

Yesterday's suspension of visits shows that the assurances given by Suharto and Alatas are worth nothing. The military who control East Timor are being given free rein to wreak terror and vengeance on the defenceless population.

Pierre Pont said yesterday that the ICRC's mandate everywhere in the world requires that they be given access to all political prisoners and all places of detention. In fact, there are many places of detention in East Timor to which the ICRC has never had access, as Sommaruga admitted in Jakarta. The agency, it seems, has been forced to compromise on some basic demands, in an effort to maintain its presence in the territory.

The ICRC was prevented from entering the territory from 1975 to 1979, when Indonesia's war to control the territory was at its height. Some two hundred thousand people, a third of the population, were killed during this period. In 1979, as the result of intense international pressure, the ICRC was allowed to open an office in Dili.

In 1992, ICRC delegates visited 110 East Timorese prisoners in twenty places of detention in East Timor and Jakarta. It also organised family visits to detainees. Since January this year, ICRC delegates in East Timor have not been able to visit a single political detainee in East Timor.